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OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF FRESHMEN

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It seems to have become the fashion lately to wonder, in print, just why one is teaching. Twice in the not distant past has the *Atlantic* made room for articles which must have struck a responsive chord in every English teacher's breast. In one of these, "Some Blank Misgivings," Mr. George Boas takes a frankly pessimistic point of view and decides that he does not know why he is doing it, for it is certainly not worth while. Inasmuch as his article was written during an examination, any teacher can appreciate his mood. Mr. Robert Gay, on the other hand, in "Why Teach?" takes a quite opposite point of view, and says that he teaches because teaching is fun.

As I reflected upon these two different verdicts, it suddenly occurred to me that there was another party not yet heard from. What does the college student think about the food which is served out to him? Especially, since in most institutions English work is required of all Freshmen, what does the college Freshman think?

In seeking an answer to this question I am considering it not in terms of pedagogy but in terms of human life. Looking upon the Freshman in the light of a man and a brother, can I decide that it is worth his while to be shoved into section A, B, or C, according to his supposed efficiency, and there, three times a week, to go through certain mental and physical gymnastics which are known as English Composition?

This is an age of statistics and questionnaires. It would be a noble statistical life-task for someone to send out a questionnaire to all the Freshmen in the United States, asking them their opinions of Freshman English, and then spend what little of existence remained to him in tabulating their replies. Being less ambitious, I confined my attack to my own particular section of Freshmen.

I asked them to read the article by Mr. Boas, and then to write answers to the following questions:

Do you feel that the teaching you have received in English Composition has had any effect upon your ability in writing?

Has it helped you any in the power of thinking, and if so, how?

Do you think you belong in any of the classes of students mentioned in this article, and if so, which?

Should a year of English Composition be required of all college Freshmen? Give your reasons for or against.

Have you any suggestions for making the course in English Composition more helpful to you?

I had expected some piquant differences of opinion, for I had urged absolute sincerity, and the college Freshman is sometimes sincere even to brutality. But, to my surprise, they stood almost solidly in the ranks of conservatism. Only two objected to English as a required subject, and one of these thought that it should be required of all except engineering students, while the other asserted that it was valuable for everyone, but that it should be chosen rather than compelled. Just how he would persuade all students to choose it, he did not explain. They all found some ways in which composition work had helped them, some even declaring, in the face of Mr. Boas' despair, that they had learned something of unity, coherence, and emphasis!

Let me hasten to add that the questions were supposed to refer to all composition work they had had so far, not merely to that accomplished this year. I have no smug feeling of satisfaction in regard to my toils with this particular group. Although they delight me at times with a genuine appreciation of something I had no idea they would appreciate, there are many other times when I look at a pile of papers and feel inclined to write upon them all *cui bono?*—or, copying the inscription which a shrewd and learned professor once put upon an examination book, “Mostly piffle!”

The main feeling which came to me as a result of this very informal questionnaire was one of increased humility. Since they accept so meekly the dictum that Freshman English is good for them, it becomes all the more important to consider what they have a right to expect from it.

Any honest English teacher knows that a course in Freshman English, or any course in English, for that matter, cannot teach a student to write and speak correctly. It cannot teach him, I say; it can help him to learn, if he has interest and determination. If he has not, any amount of labor on the part of the teacher will leave him practically untouched. He may, by making an effort, conform to certain rules and principles when he writes a theme, but in his other work—and, alas, after graduation—he will make the same mistakes he made before he ever opened a book in Freshman rhetoric.

This is not, as I said before, a pedagogical article. I am not going into any questions of methods, any devices for arousing interest. In fact, I am inclined to doubt that there are any devices of general efficacy. As one of my Freshmen remarked, refusing to include himself in any of the classes Mr. Boas had mentioned, "I think that every individual student is just a little different from everyone else."

The question in which I am interested is, Does the student get anything out of Freshman English which makes it worth while as a human experience? Does he remember anything from it in later years, besides a certain amount of practice in writing about things which he was not vitally interested in, a certain amount of time spent in correcting grammatical and rhetorical errors?

To answer these queries, I have tried to dive back into my own Freshman days, now, I regret to say, a considerable distance behind me. What do I remember of the Harvard "English A" as adapted to the Radcliffe intellect? It was a simpler course in those days, I believe, than any Freshman English is now. I remember that we met, some seventy-five or eighty of us, in a large room. The instructor, enthroned on a platform at one end, read or talked to us for about twenty minutes. Then he said, "Please take your point of departure from this and write a one-page theme." Whereupon he took his "point of departure," literally, and we proceeded to depart on paper, sometimes far indeed from the original. On the other two days of the week we came together in smaller groups with different instructors. What our regular procedure was in these meetings I really cannot recollect. I

know that we studied Hill's *Rhetoric*, and I suppose we must sometimes have recited on it. I believe we occasionally re-wrote themes. But, although even then I was expecting some time in the far-off future to be an English teacher, I cannot remember that I gained any definite theories of English teaching.

Is there nothing, then, that rises out of the past when I think of those Freshman days? Did I merely scribble something, so that I might have a page to hand in, and then dismiss it from my mind with happy unconcern?

There are, as it happens, two things which I always associate with "English A." One is the insistence of a certain instructor upon the value of specific words. I had always been fond of writing, and had written, on the whole, rather easily and fluently. But I had never had brought home to me the distinction between words that were general and colorless and those that were concrete and picturesque. It revolutionized my idea of English style. It gave me a new ideal in my own attempts at writing. I shall always be grateful to that instructor when I remember him reiterating his well-worn examples, such as, "The man walked down the street" and "The tramp lurched along the slippery pavement." And I shall always be grateful to "English A" for giving him a chance at me.

The other thing that I remember is connected with the same instructor. He had the habit of reading us something now and then, sometimes to illustrate a particular point, sometimes for general literary appreciation. One day, he read us "The Roman Road," by Kenneth Grahame. I had never heard of Kenneth Grahame before. Now there stands upon a shelf in my bookcase a copy of *The Golden Age* illustrated by Maxfield Parrish, an extravagance which I have never regretted. When I take it down and turn to "The Roman Road," there comes back to me something of the thrill of happy discovery I felt when I first heard it read. There are the Boy and the Artist beside the fascinating road—"this white ribbon that rolled itself off from my feet over the distant downs." There is the Boy-Idealist, trudging sorrowfully away from the Man-Idealist, yet with a great content in his heart, because, for once, he has been understood.

The Knights' Road! How it always brought consolation! Was he possibly one of those vanished knights I had been looking for so long? Perhaps he would be in armour next time—why not? He would look well in armour, I thought. And I would take care to get there first, and see the sunlight flash and play on his helmet and shield, as he rode up the High Street of the Golden City.

Meantime, there only remained the finding it. An easy matter.

Two things, as the result of a year of work. "But surely," says the pedagogical expert, "some one thing should have been presented to you each day. Surely each lesson should have been shaped to emphasize a special point, and all the lessons taken together should have given you a complete and systematic view of the subject. Otherwise, the teaching was not efficient."

Was it efficient? Perhaps not. The instructor I have mentioned was a youth not long out of college, who had a good sense of literary values, but not, I fancy, any very distinct theories about the art of teaching. But let us look for a minute at the other side. What did I get? A new conception of English style, a conception which helped me to look at my own feeble efforts with new eyes, and perhaps to make them a little less feeble. An entirely new possession in literature, not one of the great things, but one of the intimate, minor things which one can own more thoroughly, which mean more to one, sometimes, than the admittedly great.

Was it worth while? From my point of view, emphatically yes. And I am thinking of it now because in my own memories I find excuse for my present work. If I can give my students one fact or principle which shall have some real effect on their later writing or reading, if I can make them acquainted with some piece of literature which shall lead them into a new corner of life, then my year has been a success. Indeed, if I can do just one of these things for just one student, my time has not been wasted. It is the chance of doing this that makes teaching worth while to me; it is the chance of getting this that makes Freshman English worth while to them.

This is a time, I suppose, when all teachers are, in commercial phrase, "taking account of stock." We feel ourselves convicted

as petty and futile in the midst of the mighty forces at play. Dynasties have toppled, worlds have been turned upside down, blood has been shed by millions who had no personal grievance, no greed of conquest, whose only desire was to do a fair share of the world's work and get a fair share of the world's rewards. In the face of all this, what do the things matter that we preach in our classrooms? Does it really matter, after all, that a boy puts Kipling in the same age with Shakespeare, or sprinkles his talk with "ain't" and "I done it"?

And yet this is no time for a teacher of English, at any rate, to despair. It is the material things that have failed. The tremendous prosperity, the marvelous discoveries of science, the huge industrial organizations—all these could not prevent the sudden upheaval of the social order that seemed to us so well established, so safe and sane. All these, though they may help to combat those forces which we must defeat, may not, perhaps, bring much consolation in the time of stress.

"Over there," in the mud and the filth of the trenches, in the thundering roar of the guns, service was rendered by boys who used to sit in my English class—some of them, it is true, unwillingly enough. Some of them, leaders in other things, went through the year of English doing just as little as they could, taking it as a necessary evil that must be endured. Others, trying conscientiously to do what was expected of them, remained mediocre to the last, so far as literary expression was concerned. Yet others there were whose writing was a pleasure, whose appreciation of literature was quick and keen.

I think of them all with equal respect, as I think of the last three years. The things they were expected to learn at school seem trivial enough when compared with the things they have just been learning. Their pluck, their endurance, their matter-of-fact acceptance of conditions so different from what they had thought awaited them—what are any classroom achievements, to measure up to these?

And yet, once again I find the qualifying statement coming to my mind. I can fancy that some one of those boys, even an indifferent one, may in that year of English study have heard or read

something that, unconsciously perhaps, has influenced him. Some stray bit of literature may have excited his curiosity about the bigger things of life, may have given him a little clearer understanding of the things that are fine and brave. Perhaps this is a sentimental view to take. Perhaps it is fanciful to think that remembering some reading of the past may help out in the tedium of the trenches, in the pain of convalescence. Perhaps it is nonsense to say that some appreciation of art and beauty may help a man to a better sense of values in the life around him, even if that life is made hideous and uncertain by poisonous gas and bursting shell.

Art and beauty! What place have they, one may ask, in Freshman English? Not much, to be sure. But the other day, when I read a bit of description, one of the boys said quickly, "That's good! What is it?"

If only we teachers of English might be given grace to show people that there is beauty in literature because there is beauty in life! If only we could make these Freshmen realize that there is a genuine excitement in juggling with words, in making them go where we want them to, carrying our thought with them! Moreover, if we ourselves could only realize that Freshmen are not a race apart; that they are "just folks!" If all these things could come to pass, we might indeed still have our periods of "blank misgivings," but we should, most of the time, find that it was fun to teach.